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Who I Am Through The Lens of Distortion

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Who I Am Through The Lens of Distortion

Mackenzie Boyer

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Who I Am Through the Lens of Distortion: Preface

Throughout the course of this project it has changed and morphed within my grasp several times but it has never once varied in its genre. Over the past two years here at Otterbein, especially, I've been drawn into the world of poetry by Terry Hermsen. He has been a guiding hand and an encouraging voice throughout this whole process. I've struggled with this project as is available to be seen in the appendix. This project started as one long prose poem with found lines from books I read as a child interwoven with events that shaped me into the writer and the person I am today. It then morphed into its next form of being split apart and becoming a series of found poems from lines of books I read as a kid (i.e. Nancy Drew by Carol Kenne, A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket, and Ugliest by Scott Westerfeld to start) and pieces about my childhood and my family then. When that didn't appear to be working or at the very least going in a conducive direction we changed things again. To what it is now, 'Who I Am Through the Lens of Distortion' a project based on my own real life events but with distortion of time and place and found poems from books I've read in college. This project also touches on my coming out this year to friends and family and anyone who is my friend/follows me on social media. and all of the things that have happened/been said to me over the course of a 2- year relationship and the 3 months from since that has been made public from family, friends, and even strangers and my own reactions to the whole process. This is why I feel like this project always had to be in poetry because this is way I feel like I had to express this journey and express myself and my life. Poetry gave me a voice and an outlet to express this journey in ways that no other genre ever could. Poetry gave the room I needed to spread out, get comfortable, and tell my story the way it so desperately needed to be told. This project gave me stress and it was

always an uphill battle but one in which I would fight again and again because I'm as happy as I can be with the work it's produced and the shape it has taken of it's own accord. The project has truly made me and not the other way around.

This project has tested my boundaries and limits and also tested and played with theory and the tradition of poetry. It has certainly never been traditional in it's format, style, or content which, honestly, is a representation of myself. This project has no formal structure throughout as that is not the style/form in which I am most comfortable. I am most comfortable in free verse poetry as that is what I most usually write in/have grown up writing in. I personally don't base my poetry in any sort of history or tradition, at least not intentionally. The closest I come to form is in the piece 'What Makes a Family?' with it being written in couplets such as:

"I am the books I clung to as a child.
I am the dog-eared pages and worn covers.

I am my brother's MS.
I am his cure.

I am my mother's regret.
I am her prized possession."

The other pieces in this project are not as strict in their form and are either not broken up or broken up in simple stanza breaks where appropriate. This is also evident with the found poems because taken lines that I have not written myself and arranging them into a poem is certainly non-tradition but is something that I have grown to be comfortable in over the past couple of years here at Otterbein and something that I want to grow and expand in but not use as a crutch either. I want it to become a part of me and something that I'm good at but never something that I rely on and the only thing I'm good at.

My educational interest in the idea for this final project actually came from a sort of class assignment. In Terry Hermsen's Advanced Poetry Class we read from World Poetry book of poems and I noticed that in the poems we were assigned to read the writers tended to write their poetry from a place of distortion whether that was of place and/or time was unclear then. From there I was asked to come up with a writing prompt for the class and I was inspired to have them write like those poets and write with a distortion of place and/or time. This for me inspired a poem, 'Endless Loop' in which I weaved memories and a recurring nightmare of mine together into a poem that sets myself and the reader on edge. From there came this whole project in which I weave poems of distortion, poems about my life and my coming out, and my family together into one project. My personal interest however came from two years of waiting to tell my parents, friends, and family that I'm in a same sex relationship, it just also happened to be right before spring semester of my senior year. My coming out story was dying to be told and that was not seen by me in the beginning. But when it was brought to my attention I knew it was true and when that came to the light it seemed so obvious and I was finally free to write about this and share it with others and to let my story be told. It was so freeing and poured out of me and took the project where it wanted to go.

The main writers and texts that I would attribute as aspirations would have to be the ones that I used as inspiration for my found poems such as: *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket, *Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld, and *Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman. These are books that I read throughout the course of my life from childhood (*A Series of Unfortunate Events*) to adolescence (*Uglies*) to college (*Ocean at the End of the Lane*). But there are poets as well such as Federico Garcia Lorca, Maggie Smith, various poets from the The Vintage Book of Contemporary World Poetry anthology, and so many others.

The books I have used inspired some of my favorite lines such as:

“thirsty aspiration shall send the skyscrapers in our cities toppling”, “I’ve been following you all this time this boat is the only home we have they saw their own tears and the way they shone. But if someone is trying to hide their tears, it may also be noble to pretend you do not notice them.” from *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

“Of course she was nothing here. Worse, she was ugly. “That was why they separated uglies from pretties. It must be horrible to see an ugly face when you’re surrounded by such beautiful people.”, “But you weren’t *born* expecting that kind of beauty in everyone, all the time. You just got programmed into thinking anything else is ugly.” from *Uglies*.

“Memories were waiting at the edges of things.”, “I lay on the bed and lost myself in the stories. Books were safer than other people anyway.”, “I remember when the moon was made. Hasn’t there always been a moon? I remember the day the moon came back.”, “Adults follow paths. Children explore.”, “You’re safe as houses.”, “One day, in it’s own time, the ocean will give her back. You get on with your own life. You just have to grow up and try and be worth it.” from *Ocean at the End of the Lane*.

I was also inspired by poets and their work that we read in Advanced Poetry this semester and I tried to pull inspiration from their works for my project. Such as Lorca’s use of imagery: “Among black butterflies goes a dark girl beside a white serpent of mist.” from ‘The Passage of Siguriya’, “In the green morning I wanted to be a heart, A heart. And in the ripe evening I wanted to be a nightingale. A nightingale.” from ‘Ditty of First Desire’ he uses such vivid and colorful imagery and I tried to pull that into my work in my own way. The poems that inspired this whole project from The Vintage Book of Contemporary World Poetry were ‘Yesterday’,

‘Inventory of Places Propitious for Love’, ‘The All, The Nothing’, ‘My Body’, ‘Temporary City’, ‘Upon a Certain Little Star’.

In particular the lines that inspired me in particular (respectively) were:

“Yesterday was Wednesday all morning. By afternoon it changed: it became almost Monday,”
“And also those crevices that autumn makes when it intercedes with Sundays in some cities that are already as yellow as bananas.”, “May the big snow be for you the all, the nothing, Child trying out your first uncertain steps in the grass, Your eyes still full of the origin, Hands grabbing at nothing but the light.”, “My body, you will not fill the ditch That I am digging, that I deepen each night”, “(in one ear dangled a silver earring, the other was torn out by the branch of an apple tree gone wild, there were once orchards here now tall buildings line the way, through their windows you see only other windows, as if some other world)”, and finally for it’s amazing one liners and distortion, “I apologize to coincidence for calling it necessity. “I apologize to old love for regarding the new as the first. I apologize to the cut-down tree for the table’s four legs. I apologize to everything that I cannot be everywhere.”

Finally I’ve gotten a lot of inspiration from our recent reading of Maggie Smith’s book ‘The Well Speaks of its Own Poison’ with lines such as: “When she leaves the path, the forest opens for her like a picture book minus the story in which she has a deer for a brother and braids him a leash out of flowers. She measures her distance in line: a sonnet for every fourteen steps down.” from ‘Vanishing Point’, “It was like when the wolf ate chalk to soften his voice, but the white goats knew him by his black paws.” “not the last tier of wedding in the icebox, white and glittering like a glacier.” from ‘The List of Dangers’, “The school buses are talking. All night, cars drove lights across the wall, the shapes interrupting my sleep. My dreams are so obvious, they condescend.” from ‘Mental Note’, “Do not send your seven sons with a jug. They’ll drop it,

and you'll curse them into birds, shoo them into a glass mountain far from any mention of their names." "You might want to look away. She cuts off her finger and turns it inside the keyhole." from 'Seven Disappointments (1)'.

What, I have found, to be the significance of this work is personal to me it speaks such a person story that I have been aching to tell. This project has given me an outlet to two years worth of pent up emotions. But it's also given me some room to play and have fun with the distortion of my real life events with fictitious ones and getting a little dirty in the land of dreams, nightmares, and surrealism. But I also feel like this project has turned into a culturally significant work as well because it speaks to our cultures heteronormativity and our treatment of the LGBTQIA+ community and how that needs to change to not inflict physical, mental, emotional, spiritual harm on its members. This project also brings to light how close to home these activities come to those you'd never expect. As was asked of me during my senior reading regarding my piece "A Beautiful Dream Coming Out of a Nightmare." -Nancy Wood.' if the, "lines/quotes that my girlfriend and I used throughout our piece were things we had actually heard said to us or in general?" and my reply that yes, all of those things had been said or done directly to us silenced the room.

Such as, "You're just confusing a good friendship for something more.", "Oh so you're a dyke now?", "You're going to hell", "Just because she can't find a boyfriend doesn't mean she has to have a girlfriend.", "Prove it.", 'A stranger catcalling from his car and his look of anger when we held up our hands joined together.', 'Another man cheering us as we kiss at a red light like we're zoo animals.', "I would be better if they were still closeted.", 'It just makes me uncomfortable.'

Even though I have yet to experience as bad of hatred that has been inflicted on others, in the past, present, or future, it's still hard for members outside of the LGBTQIA+ community to fathom any kind of hatred just because of the person you love. Such as I reference in 'Hands', 'This Body Matters', and 'What Makes a Family?' (quotes listed below respectively):

"Our hands know hushed whispers
and sideways glances
Our hands know harsh words
and a desire to not hold each other.

Our hands know judgement.
Our hands know hatred."

"This body matters when it's lying with a man.
This body matters when it's lying with a woman.

This body knows pain.
This body knows hate simply for whom it loves.

This body has been sentenced to hell.
This body is already being licked by flame.
This body has already known torture.

This body is a privileged body
The body is an oppressed body."

"I am my mother's regret.
I am her prized possession."

I certainly know that before I was in a same sex relationship I had no idea the hatred and judgment that is inflicted and even though I was an ally then and thought I could sympathize and empathize I never fully understood until it was me on the other end of a dirty look while I'm out with my girlfriend. I'm just glad to have gotten the opportunity to provide my own social commentary on this subject, that it has allowed me to add to my own personal growth and that it's this, my senior project that has allowed me to do so.

With this project I truly hope that it will teach and/or inform others about what its like to be a part of an oppressed group, of what it's like to be judged, of what it's like for your sexuality to be completely in the hands of someone else to judge and validate. I hope for readers to gain my perspective and from there be able to form their own and make their own opinions. I hope this project teaches others to cherish their privilege and to learn from their own privilege as well. But on a lighter note, I hope this teaches others to look for poetry everywhere, to find it in books, in snippets of conversation overheard on a walk, in nature and have the courage to use it, to put it into your poetry and make something out of it. I hope this project teaches others to have fun, to be able to play with poetry and the blending of poetry and fiction, and to not be afraid to break the mold and step outside the box with their poetry. But above all I just hope that current and future readers can simply get and/or learn anything from my project. It doesn't even have to necessarily be any of the things I've listed above. I just hope that someone who reads this will take something, anything away from it and be able to go out into the world with their eyes a little more open, with a slightly new outlook for the world, or anything like this. If I can accomplish this even in the most remote way, in even just one person I can consider myself and my project a success.

I think this project is distinctive and innovative in it's content simply because it blends together different styles, content, sides of myself and my story all into one. It has, I think it's in own way, successfully blended all of these together and has ended up being a well rounded description of me and my story. I believe it's innovative because I don't know of any senior projects about one's own coming out story, not that this is an un-written about subject, but it's not typically used as the subject in this context. I also believe it's innovative because I've been able to show my talent for found poetry throughout this project and grow in my skills in

surrealism/dreamlike poetry; that in which I was not entirely familiar with before this project but had done some work in. Do I think that this work is extremely creative and has never been done before? No. Do I think that it is at least in the slightest unique in the exact nature of it's context? Yes and that is something that I'm very happy with.

For this project I took risks simply by including the content that I did, I took risks outing myself during my senior readings, and laying it all out for others to see and to judge. But this project has made me comfortable with those risks, happy even with those risks! This project is also a demonstration of all the risks I've taken with my relationship as well. Such as: being in a committed same-sex relationship, telling friends, family, and social media friends. Throughout this project I feel like I've taken a lot of risks and I'm quite happy with how it has turned out.

Section 1: Distortion

Sympathy and Secrets

I have a secret
I don't know what poison ivy actually looks like
and never once wondered to care.

I don't have sympathy for dynamite
or clay covered bottoms of children's feet.

I sympathize with crystallized branches
so cold a strong wind may shatter them.

I have a secret
one as deep as the root of a tree
and one as old as something rotten.

I don't have sympathy for poorly built tables
or boys who leave the bar alone.

I sympathize with coerced women
and children who are afraid to get dirty.

I have a secret
as cold as an icebox
full of fossilized sweet peas.

I sympathize with those who hate to see winter go
and those who hate to see winter coming.

I have a secret
one that may only be spoken in whispers
so hushed not even our guilt can hear it.

I don't have sympathy for ignorance
or people who love misery.

I sympathize with people who are closeted and afraid
and people who don't even know who they are.

I have a secret
one as deep and rugged
as the scar on my right hand.

But I've shared that secret to any who care to listen
and I am finally free.

I have a secret
and I have none at all.

Calming Meadow Greens

Falling asleep in the meadow
birds chirping their siren songs
lulling me to sleep with every tune.

The small rodents staring at my sleeping form with tiny black eyes.
I shift in my slumber and they scurry away
only to return moments later much bigger than before.
They crawl on top of me making nests of me
they burrow in my hair and in my clothes.
The birds begin to swoop down too, their eyes beady and curious.
They hop closer, curious of the spectacle of the rodents and I.

They peck at the flesh of my arms and legs,
I rouse slightly, swatting them away and they retreat,
they too, return much larger and more vicious than before.
Slowly I'm covered in a blanket of animals,
no longer visible to the world around me.
The sun begins to set behind the distant trees,
the world quiet.
The animals scurry home, bellies full and licking their lips.
The birds fly off, satisfied with their work,
and I lie, a heap of bones
in the meadow.

Collusion

noun

i.e. secret or illegal cooperation or conspiracy,
especially in order to cheat or deceive others.

I'll cherish you when you're whole,
I'll heal you when you're not,
and I'll keep you safe all the times in between.
You tell me to make me feel better,
you tell me to make me feel comfortable.
Even if you have schemed or been deceitful
or have kept secrets from me.
I promise no conspiracy will fall upon you
only love like rain will shower you.
No matter what you seek
or what you may find.
Trust in me to give you shelter.
Find your home in me
in my lovers embrace and
I shall protect you until the end.
I will save you from your foes
and make my home in your hands.
I'll only hold you as firmly as you'd like
but firmly enough to make you stay.
No matter what lies laid on my ears
I swear to be true
and that was true
for the first few months.

But this is all a ruse
I've never felt more trapped.
No I'm not locked in your basement
with nothing to eat.
But I'm locked in your heart
your hand clutching mine.
I have believed your lies and your promises
when you've only been deceitful
I know now your promises are not my home.
You have cheated,
you have cheated,
and yet I'm still here.
You're playing me for a fool.
You love is nothing but a scheme
I don't feel safe with you
not now that the blindfold has been lifted
and the light of day has burned my irises.
I am no longer blind to your treachery.

You can not keep me here
no matter how much you struggle,
no matter how much you beg,
no matter how much you threaten suicide
I will not stay here
in a place where I don't feel safe.
But I'll be the one laughing
when there is no one left to seek your happiness
or save your soul.
I'll be the last one laughing
when I hold your throat in my hands
and you begging for forgiveness.

Poison Ivy

Does poison ivy feel guilt
for giving itchy rashes
to children like candy?
I whisper before I am set ablaze
I feel the flames licking
the bottom of my tattered tank top.
I can't stop thinking about
fossilized dreamcatchers full of old nightmares.
Does poison ivy bloom or is it quiet?
I am at the center of an energy
plastering my festering skin to me and
here I am all because of that complete douchebag.

The Lover of Language is Never Lonely

Impossible to be alone in language
words covering you like a lover
keeping you warm in their simplicity.
When you're at your most lonely
hunched over a laptop typing away
at a story,
at a poem,
at an essay,
at a screenplay,
desperate to finish it before a deadline,
desperate to finish it for yourself,
desperate to finish it to feel validated.
The words pouring down your arms,
up over your shoulders,
and running down your back
covering you in a loving embrace.
Suddenly a smile graces your lips
and you're not sure why.
Suddenly a warm sensation
begins to pool in your heart
and you're not sure why.
Your fingers rest on the keyboard
and you look up from the white screen
out of the coffee shop window,
into your bedroom or office
and you see the words in the world
billboards, license plates,
newspapers, letters,
bills, magazines.
Any sense of loneliness fades away,
you look back to the screen
and begin to type again.
It's impossible to be alone in language.

What is Real?

Walking outside, my bare feet.
Wind whipping my hair, the fire crackles before me.
I've lost track of how long I've been here
I hear my name called through the breeze
I cover my ears with stiff fingers.
"It's not real"
"It's not real"
"It's not real"
I'm not loud enough to drown out the voice
it intensifies with the wind and surrounds me.
"IT'S NOT REAL!"
"IT'S NOT REAL!"
"IT'S NOT REAL!"

The fire dies and the woods around me go silent.
You stand where the fireplace once stood.
Head down, long red hair covering your face
I can no longer convince myself that you're not here.
Your hair smolders like hot coals.
Your hair bursts into flames
Your eyes are as black as the night.
I make myself small in an attempt to hide from you.
You take a step closer and lower your face
Your soulless eyes less than an inch from mine
Close my eyes and you're gone.
The fireplace returns and the wind dies down.
Same as it has a thousand times before.

Section 2: Lens Through Which I View the World

Clever Orphans

A Found Poem: Lines from Lemony Snicket's 'A Series of Unfortunate Events'

The story only gets worse
this dark curious feeling of falling
Would anyone rescue them there?
We can't have another tragedy on our hands
You shouldn't tell lies, orphans
the entire world has been changed
by one tiny action
the pond's murky depths
if we observe everything around us,
perhaps some of these mysteries will become clear
let her burn to a crisp if she wants
don't make this your destiny
marveling at the way they were escaping
the machinery of the clock
scarcely audible over the sound of croaking frogs
could not see the pond through the cloud of steam
And who are you?
Who better than you to keep the world's most important secret?
you won't have to be at sea anymore
my comrade arrived on the scene
we can ask for justice and we can ask for a handkerchief
thirsty aspiration
shall send the skyscrapers in our cities toppling
for a moment they were tempted to
you're in my clutches at last, orphans
we're all in the same boat
jump overboard and swim back toward the city
moved the sail to catch the wind
I've been following you all this time
this boat is the only home we have
they saw their own tears and the way they shone
But if someone is trying to hide their tears,
it may also be noble to pretend you do not notice them.

Pretty Faces, Ugly World

A Found Poem: Lines from Scott Westerfeld's 'Uglies'

The early summer sky was the color of cat vomit.
Put her down!
Where the hell did she come from?
Of course she was nothing here
Worse, she was ugly.
There was a certain kind of beauty,
a prettiness that everyone could see.
Big eyes and full lips like a kid's;
smooth, clear skin; symmetrical features;
and a thousand other little clues.
That was why they separated uglies from pretties.
It must be horrible to see an ugly face
when you're surrounded by such beautiful people.
What, can't you stand me? Do you need to get some
picture into your head so you can imagine it
instead of my face?
Come on. It's just for fun."
Making ourselves feel ugly is not fun.
We *are* ugly.
This whole game is just designed to make us hate ourselves.
Whatever had destroyed this city the people had tried to escape it.
The Rusties had been stuck down in these streets
like a horde of rats trapped in a burning maze.
Being in the city all the time made everything fake, in a way.
We're not freaks, Tally. We're normal. We may not be gorgeous,
but at least we're not hyped-up Barbie dolls.
But it's a trick, Tally. You've only seen pretty faces your whole life.
Your parents, your teachers, everyone over sixteen.
But you weren't *born* expecting that kind of beauty
in everyone, all the time.
You just got programmed into thinking anything else is ugly.
I'm sick of this city, I'm sick of the rules and boundaries.
The last thing I want is to become some empty-headed new pretty,
having one big party all day.
It's just called The Smoke. It's not a city, and nobody's in charge.
And nobody's pretty.

Rhododendrons, Daffodils and the Moon's Return

A Found Poem: Lines from Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

I grimaced at my own foolishness.
But I was curious.
The little country lane of my childhood.
It was reaching its end.
The Hempstocks' farmhouse.
She called it the sea. Something like that.
Memories were waiting at the edges of things.
I remembered her being in the water.
It wasn't the sea. It was the ocean.
Lettie Hempstock's ocean.
I lay on the bed and lost myself in the stories.
Books were safer than other people anyway.

I was not there when it happened.
Not to worry. Disposed of the corpse.
Don't have to trouble yourself. Dealt with the matter.
I could not forgive him for the death of my kitten.
I knew only that *anatomy* made people kill their children.
There is a dead man in our car.
Do you think he killed himself?
Yes. Do you like milk?

It's not a pond. It's my ocean.
What makes the ocean different to the sea?
Bigger.
Deep in the rhododendron thicket
they caught up with me
intent on selling me to anatomy
I woke and I was choking.

Now he's started seeing things in mirrors.
Why did I find a shilling in my throat?
He wanted people to have money.
She seemed so grown-up then that I was almost scared of her.
So many daffodils,
something's causing trouble.
It's new. It says 1912 on it, but it didn't exist yesterday.
She gave me back the coin.

I remember when the moon was made.
Hasn't there always been a moon?
I remember the day the moon came back.
Ghosts can't make things

You shall help me with the daffs.
I'll have a word with the wigglers in his mouth.
Get them to leave his teeth alone.
You'll be needing a hazel wand.
Don't say I didn't warn you, it it all goes wobbly.
I'm not dowsing
the omnipresent white and yellow daisies,
a lone bluebell in the shadows
must have been a Roman road.
The next thing we're looking for is a storm
in a world made green.

Name yourself.
Empty eyes stared down at us.
I am the lady of this place,
my name is my own, child.
I thought it was smiling. Perhaps it was smiling.
Girls and boys come out to play
beneath the orange sky.
And through all this, she continued to sing.

I had dominion over the nature of all
I had spoken the language of shaping.
Lettie Hempstock finished her song
the world smelled like honey.
I could not see how deeply it went.
I could be a monster.
My sister came out into the garden.
Adults follow paths. Children explore.
Who are you?
I had never felt so alone.
I slept without comfort.
I wanted to talk to him but he was never alone.
I did not want to risk making my father angry with me.

The fairy ring
butter-yellow daffodils,
Because she's not human, she's a monster, she's a *flea*.
A less impressive daffodil.
We struggled.
Next time, I lock you in the attic.
You're still just a flea.

And perhaps, if I was lucky, she might be distracted.
The clouds seem to gather up light from distant
streetlights and houses below, and throw it back at the earth.

My father, his arms around the housekeeper-who-wasn't, kissing her neck.
The future was suddenly unknowable.

I cut away across the meadow running on soft grass.
Oh sweetie-weety-pudding-and-pie, you are in so much trouble.
I told you I was going to lock you in the attic, didn't I?
The inside of your head, the hunt was done.
I was an adult when your world was a ball of molten rock.
I could have ruled worlds.
This world is a world of rules, little girl.

The meadow exploded into golden light.
You'll catch your death.
I felt safe.
As if the essence of grandmotherliness
had been condensed into that one place.
I dunno what blessed good a man would be!

They were older than birds.
She can't save you, your little friend.
She was ripped to shreds by alien vulture-monsters.
with no jury or judge would be wasting our breath.
From outside the universe of things I understood.
A rustle in the rhododendrons

How can you be happy in this world?
You have a hole in your heart.
There was silence.
Everything whispered inside me.
Could there be candle flames burning under water?
Lettie Hempstock looked like pale silk and candle flames.
The world outside the kitchen was still waiting,
the innumerable hunger birds.

There was silence in the Sussex night.
Not blackness, not nothingness.
Now only a pulsing nothingness that hurt my eyes.
She was between us and our lawful prey.
They could have hurt you, child, and it would've meant nothing.

You're safe as houses.
They were meant to hurt me, not her.
Breaking the reflected moon into dozens of tiny moons.
One day, in its own time, the ocean will give her back.
You get on with your own life.
You just have to grow up and try and be worth it.

Section 3: Who I Am

The Night Sleep Came Fretfully and Timidly

The average person speaks about 300 million words in a lifetime.

Three.

Hundred.

Million.

Words.

So many words hung on the lips, teeth, and tongues
of people hungry for much more than just words.

So why are these four words so hard to say?
Why are these 4 words stuck in my throat,
sealed there with cement?

Why do these four words feel more like fire
about to burn up my whole world?

I've used all of these words before.
But not in this order,
or to you--
the ones who gave me life.

I.

Have.

A.

Girlfriend.

I'm choking on these words
I mean I've said them before,
just not to you,
just not in this exact context.

Almost 2 years now, you've questioned me.
"Are you dating anyone?"
"You should get out and find someone."
You had so many boyfriends in high school."

Yet, that phrase is trapped,
silent in my throat.

2 years is:
A long time to hide a love as strong as ours.
(A long time for me to hide much of anything from you two).
A long time to hold back a phrase that
will rock our foundation to its core.

“I have a girlfriend.”

What's so hard about these words?

Nothing
And
Everything.

All I want is love and acceptance.

I have that in my relationship,
in my friendships, and sisterhood.
But I've yet to find the courage
to say these four little words to you.

But as I fall asleep tonight,
on the last night of your blissful ignorance,
I can't help but feel happy.

Happy to be free.
To finally be out.
To finally choose happy at it's fullest.
To embrace the outcome of my actions.

That's why these four little words are a little less scary.
Even though I can't say them while holding her hand.
I know she'll be just a text or phone call away right afterwards.

I say these words because I have a love
worth being open and honest about.

I have a love worth fighting
to the ends of the earth for.

I have a love worth shouting from a mountain top or
saying at a strained whisper because I'm scared of the outcome.

I have a girlfriend and one to be damn proud of.

Endless Loop

Crawling and trying to get away,
the house getting smaller around me.
Everything in slow motion,
doors not budging beneath
my heavy sluggish fingers.
No room to breathe,
no room to stand,
no room to be.

You're fingers running through my hair
warm, soft sand beneath our bodies
goosebumps ripple along my tanned flesh
the sun warming them away again.
I see your smile through squinted eyes
it seems so bright in my mind's eye.

Running, but never fast enough
the house getting bigger and bigger,
never ending series of doorways,
halls stretching for miles on end.
I run and run and run and get nowhere,
my lungs are straining and I can't breathe.
I fall and can't get up.

Driving down the strip
lights everywhere, people walking
one of your hands in mine,
the other on the wheel.
We're laughing and smiling
friends singing along to the radio in the back.

I cry out for you
your name lost in the walls.
I hear your voice, my name on your lips.
I get up and run again
down the halls and through the doors
your voice getting louder and louder.
I hear your voice directly behind a door
I smile a small tired grin and open the door.
My smile falls at the hallway before me,
your voice long gone and lost in white walls.

When Our Love Drops Upon The City Like Rain

Heartbeat pulsing,
your sensual touch
strumming my heart strings raw;
our nightly carnival
crammed in our studio apartment.
Your cosmic breath
lifting me up to be amongst the stars

On the roof of our building
we danced beneath a crescent moon
and listened to the calming traffic
far below us.
Love gave us tunnel vision
so deep and pure it was,
laying kisses on your throat
left us with a tingling
that no hexagon could contain.

It was not timid
nor did it have a tied tongue.
It ran as smooth as the city
until our end
when we shed our skin
and gave way to night.

Hands

These hands are torn and unwanted.
Your hands are healers and joy.

These hands run over your body
dipping and swelling with your curves
tracing them like mountain ranges.

Your hands rest on my hip bones
running an index finger where it hollows
goosebumps rippling up my sides
feathers sprouting.

These hands cup your shoulder blades
holding your body to me to keep you together
harder than holding back a thunderstorm.

Your hands caress my cheeks
coming to rest at the back of my neck
a slow exhale of breath,
a steam engine in station.

These hands fit so perfectly in yours
coming together like Pangea.

Your hands run through my hair
sifting the sands of our time together.

These hands have known trouble
they're ripped with a jagged scar
tracing the edges of my foolishness.

Your hands know the insides of softball gloves
and white knuckled baseball bats
begging to win the game to beat the rain.

These hands have a need to be useless
and are silent when my feet are working
run faster, score a goal only to impress.

Your hands know anxiety
broken skin and nails bitten
restlessness visible to those who only look.

Our hands show a symbol of us
a ring on our left hands
on the 4th finger
'I love you more'
'I love you most'

One day that finger will hold a different meaning
that finger running the vein of love to our hearts
our hands joined, love flowing between us
the bluest of oceans ebbing.

Our hands know love.
Our hands know our bodies.

Our hands know hushed whispers
and sideways glances
Our hands know harsh words
and a desire to not hold each other.

Our hands know judgement.
Our hands know hatred.

But our hands have 4 middle fingers.
Our hands always have something to hold
Our hands always bind us together
the key at the end of a kite string
waiting for lightning and a miracle.

What Makes a Family?

I am my mom's gray hair.
I am her sense of wonder.

I am my green eyes given by my father.
I am my mom's green contact lenses.

I am the trampoline bought for me when I was 8.
I am the rusty mess that now resides in our backyard.

I am the jagged scar on my right hand
I am my own clumsiness.

I am the books I clung to as a child.
I am the dog-eared pages and worn covers.

I am my brother's MS.
I am his cure.

I am the late night drunken arguments.
I am the tears my mom sheds.

I am my stepdad's alcoholism.
I am his poisoned liver.

I am the texts from my sister begging to live with me.
I am her burden when I say that she can't.

I am 4 am talks about things that have never been said before.
I am the lunch dates where no one speaks.

I am the engraving on my grandfathers' headstones.
I am the hospitals visits never made.

I am weeds picked with my grandmother.
I am her words banishing me to hell.

I am my mother's regret.
I am her prized possession.

This Body Matters

This body matters when it's lying with a man.
This body matters when it's lying with a woman.

This body is my temple.
One where I want to decorate the walls
with my own hands
with ink
with metal
with cat scratches.

This body matters on days when it feels beautiful.
This body matters the weeks that it doesn't.

This body is a vessel for love.
A vessel for truth,
for passion
for regret
for guilt.

This body I treat with respect.
This body I loathe.

This body is a tree
fertile and supple
and stripped bare
at least 3 months of the year.

This body knows pain.
This body knows hate simply for whom it loves.

This body is an ocean
ebbing and flowing
never ceasing
and polluted.

This body knows deceit.
This body knows treachery.

This body knows hands around it's throat
fear in it's heart
and hatred in it's eyes.

This body knows damnation.
This body knows God's divine wrath.

This body has been sentenced to hell.
This body is already being licked by flame.
This body has already known torture.

This body is a bird whose wings have been clipped.
This body is a song bird mounted and stuffed.

This body has no home
because "it's confused".
This body is not the majority
and it's not the minority.

This body has been bruised by sunlight.
This body has drowned in the night sky.

This body has been lost in white noise.
It has been blown away in a breeze.
This body is a torch
and a god damn wrecking ball.

This body is fighting back.
This body is ill.

This body is a plastic body.
melted and deformed
and causing cancer in others.

This body is a privileged body
The body is an oppressed body.

But this body is not done yet.

“The most beautiful dream coming out of a nightmare.”

-Nancy Wood

*A spoken word poem written and performed by Mackenzie Boyer and Katie Mackerty.

Mackenzie Boyer’s Story

Our Story

Katie Mackerty’s Story

I had never felt so scared in my life

Depression, anxiety, fear of rejection

Coming Out

Bisexual

Demisexual

Same Sex

Couple

Happy

“I knew it”

“Prove it”

“Really?!”

“I don’t understand”

“Oh so you’re a dyke now?”

“Just because she can’t find a
boyfriend doesn’t mean she has to
have a girlfriend.”

“You’re just confusing a good
friendship for something more.”

“Does this mean you won’t
ever like boys again?”

“I don’t believe in gay marriage.”

“Who all have you told?”

“Who else knows?”

Biblical lines recording my damnation

“Is it something I did?”

“You’re going to hell.”

Three days of silence...

“It just makes me uncomfortable.”

A stranger catcalling from his car
and his look of anger when we
held up our hands joined together

Another man cheering us on as we
kiss at a streetlight like we’re zoo
animals

That makes *me* uncomfortable.

“You can’t get married”

“You can’t have kids”

“You don’t know what you want
because you haven’t had sex with
a man yet.”

“It’s just a phase.”

“Please don’t put it on Facebook,
some things have to be kept private.”

“There’s no need to announce it on
social media, keep it to yourself.”

Fuck you society, we did.

And the praise we got made it
all worth it.

“I’m so proud of both of you.”

“You are brave, you are beautiful, you are perfect.”

“You, my friend, deserve so much love.

It feels good don’t it?”

“Being yourself.”

“Normal is being happy, you’re
happy, I’m happy.”

“All that matters is you found
someone to
make you happy.”

High five from my dad
“I just didn’t want you
to be alone, I’m glad you found
someone to make you happy.”

“You will always be my daughter.”
Then he was silenced by my mother.

“When two spirits connect with love
it matters not the wrappings.
Cherish the love.”

“We will always love you.”

144 likes

169 likes

Love is love.

“You deserve all the happiness
in the world.”

“Congratulations!”

“We will always love you.”

“You are family.”

Applause when we walk into
classrooms together .

Endless hugs and support.

Holding hands around campus.

Kissing without having to hide.

Our love existing in plain view.

My great uncle and aunt unfriended
me because they didn't want to see
my relationship on Facebook.

High school best friends ignoring it,
because they didn't want to hear
about it. I am not allowed to be
publically happy.

"It would be better if they
were still closeted."

Well we thought you were our friend.

Appendix

Worshipping Windows

“Please stand.”
I grip her hand as we speak the Lord’s prayer.
I already know it by heart.
“Our Father which art in Heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come...”
I hear my young voice speaking these words
but my innocent eyes drift
up to the colored glass
sending rainbows down upon us like grace.
“Give us this day our daily bread
and forgive us our trespasses...”
They’re more beautiful than
anything my young heart has seen
I count them and try to detect their differences,
I refuse to believe their supposed sameness.
“For thine is the kingdom, the power,
and the glory forever. Amen”
“You may be seated.”
A smiled graces my lips
I sit beside her,
my short legs dangling down,
not quite long enough
to reach the sacred ground.
She pats her thigh beneath a floral dress
and I quiver with excitement.
My favorite part of church.
I rest my head in her lap and
she runs her aging hands through my young hair
as she sings along to hymns I don’t yet know,
I stare up at the stained glass windows high above
amazed by their beauty, the brilliance of oranges,
deep blues, mystical purples, and warm yellows.
My grandmother looks down and smiles
upon her granddaughter drifting off to sleep.
I don’t remember any of those services
but I do remember praying to and worshipping
those heavenly stained glass windows.

Big Sister

“You’re gonna be a big sister”
My mom tells me a smile on her lips
a baby growing in her slightly rounded belly.
I stare at her, unsure of what to do
Should I be happy about this?
Or should I be upset that this
is this why we’re moving?
Even at 7-years-old I understood this much
everything was going to change.
My rest my hands on her stomach
and then my face follows slowly.
“Hi little baby”
A tear falls down my mom’s face
“It’s a girl, you’re having a little sister”
I look up and smile at her,
I’ve always wanted a little sister.

Things go on normally,
more or less,
until mommy is put in the hospital.
They won’t say why
just that the baby is in danger.
She’s spent a lot of time in the hospital
and I a lot of time with my grandma.
I visit and cuddle in her bed with the bars
we stay up late and watch Jurassic Park.
Ron asleep and snoring on the loveseat.
I snuggle into my mom
afraid of the monsters on screen.
I feel Bayley kick into my side.
I press my hand to that spot and she kicks again.
“She’s fighting the monsters off for me.”
“That’s what sisters do, they look out for each other.
Are you gonna look out for her?”
“No one’s ever gonna hurt her, mommy!”
My mom snuggles me closer to her
she strokes my head until my eyelids get heavy.
Bayley kicking into me lulls me to sleep.

I couldn’t be in the room when Bayley was coming
I had to sit out in the waiting room,
my grandma’s hand in mine,
her thumb stroking in circles.
“Where’s mommy?
Is she okay?
Where’s Bayley?”

“Everything’s alright, dear.
These things take time it’s okay.”
My feet kicking back and forth
back and forth
my young anxiety growing.
A doctor comes out,
“Both mommy and baby are doing fine
But we had to take Bayley to the NICU,
she needs some extra help and is too little.
You can come in and see mommy though.”
He looks down at me and I get angry
I’m not that little
Mommy looks tired
She sees me and grins.
“Hi baby”
She seems to be falling asleep
her eyes drifting open and closed.
“Let’s let mommy sleep, okay?”
“Okay”
My eyes didn’t leave her until
the wall obstructed my view.

Waiting for her to come home was excruciating!
“When are they gonna be here?”
“Soon darling, be patient”
I don’t know what that means
so I look back out the window.
Eyes wide looking for her car.
When I finally see their car pull into the drive
I jump up and scream
“They’re here! They’re here!”
I run to the back door and wait for them
They open the door and I jump to my feet.
“Let me see her! Let me see her! Please!”
“Mackenzie! Calm down please.”
I pout and wait for them to put her car seat down.
I see her scrunched little face so red and pinched
“She’s beautiful! Can I hold her?!”
The adults share a worried glance
“Yes but you have to be sitting on the couch
and I have to be next to you, okay?”
I run to the living room and sit on the couch
awaiting my new little sister who’s finally home.
“Now hold her gently and support her neck, okay sweetie?”
My mom places her in my lap and I look down at her
“I love her”
I tell my mom who sheds a tear
“She loves you too, Mackenzie.”

Accident Prone

As a baby and through my whole life
I have been prone to sickness and the common cold.
When I was a baby the only way I could sleep
was with the help of a humidifier
and the comforting touch of my mom.
Through one particularly nasty cold
my mom was snuggling with me
humidifier by her bed puffing out steam.
During the night I somehow managed
to fall off the bed and laid on the humidifier.
The old thing burned through my fleece pajamas
and to my skin leaving me wailing.
My mother took care of me
and got me calmed down.
But this was only the beginning of a long
series of accident prone moments
in which her oldest daughter would find herself.

Laying on the stairs going up to my play house
I was convinced my back was broken
I couldn't catch my breath after the fall
So I lay there in silence
my breaths coming short and quick, unable to move.
I saw my mom running towards me
"Mackenzie! Mackenzie!
Are you okay? Oh my god! Are you hurt?"
As soon as she got there the tears started to fall
and I was finally able to breath
and to scream from the agony.
"What on earth happened here?"
"I... fell... off... the... monkey... bars..."
I said between gulping sobs and piercing screams.
My mom carried me into the house and laid me on the couch
"My back... is broken! My... back is... broken!"
"You're back isn't broken sweetie."
She tried to soothe me to no avail
I was convinced I was doomed to never walk again.
Luckily that was not the case
and with rotations of ice and a heating pad
the pain began to subside.

"Stop bleeding on my floor!"
My "friend" screamed at me
as I held my bleeding foot in my hands, tears streaming

and her older brother calling my parents.
“Stop bleeding! It’s getting everywhere!” she shouted.
“I can’t! I hurt myself really bad!” I shouted back.
Although I was in pain, I was fascinated to be able to see
the insides of my foot through the inch long cut
that now sliced through the bottom of my left foot.
She had been chasing me around her house
in a rage over something, this wasn’t new.
My foot had been caught on a raised nail
and was now bleeding profusely.
My mom rushed in the front door and held me.
I spent a few hours in the hospital
and came out with 7 stitches and a heavily bandaged foot.
The scar still remains to this day.

Sitting on the curb in front of batting cages
slowly pulling off my shoe.
The sight of blood on the toes of my sock left me pale
I gently pulled my sock off
only to reveal that it was worse than I had thought.
My big toe nail was dangling by a thread
I gasped at the sight unsure of how to react.
I glared at the sheet of metal that had mangled my foot
and cursed my own stupidity to have done this to myself.
With the help of my friend I limped around the building
and back to my house not quite crying but in a lot of pain.
My dad laid me on his bed with a towel beneath my foot
“My toe has a heartbeat.” I told my uncle and he nodded.
My dad called my mom and took me to the ER
They stitched the nail back on
and told me to wait for the new nail to grow.
I was out of commission for my basketball team
my heart was broken.

A week after my foot had healed
I found myself back at the ER
but this time it was for something much more serious.
Playing with my friend outside
I decided to walk on this wood pile along his neighbors fence.
It was very unsteady and found myself slipping.
In an attempt to catch myself I grabbed onto the fence.
However the fence was topped in a barbed wire-like material
it sliced through my hand
from midway down my ring finger to the middle of my palm.
A long white cut sliced through my hand.
I stood and watched it

turn from white to pink to red to dripping blood.
“Uh... Dad?!?!” I ran home and burst through the back door.
“Don’t be mad...” I told him
But when he saw my hand he was anything but mad.
Hours in the ER and 32 stitches later and I was patched up
An accident prone kid with a big sense of adventure.

Grandparents

Riding bikes down the road
the town quiet around us
only the sounds of twigs breaking
beneath our tires
and our laughter;
filling the wide spaces around us.
Riding out to park
quite a distance from the house.
“They just put in this big loop track,
you’ll see! It’s a blast!”
My Mammaw is calling over her shoulder.
My Pappaw smiles at me and winks.
I giggle and keep pedaling.
We reach the park and the track is huge.
“This is awesome!”
I pedal as fast as my little legs can take me
flying past my grandparents.
I laugh over my shoulder and pedal faster still.
My Mammaw manages to catch up to me,
“I caught you” she laughs.
We lose sight of Pappaw for quite awhile.
“We should go back and find him”
We turn around and find him sitting on the path
his bike on it’s side and he’s laughing.
“John! Oh my! What happened?”
Pappaw is laughing too hard to say.
“I flipped...
handle... bars...”
“You flipped over your bars??”
Mammaw kneels down to help me up
she checks him for any injuries.
“John, are you alright??”
Pappaw finally stops laughing.
“I’m alright, Eileen,
just a little shook up.
As he stands we start laughing ourselves.

“Nanny, are we going to the pool today?”
“You bet, sweet pea!”
I grab my swim suit out of my bag
and run upstairs to change.
I run back downstairs
suit on under my clothes.

“Kenny, are you sure you want to stay home?”

“I’m sure, Shirley, you have fun.”

I give Papa Kenny a kiss on the cheek.

“Bye Papa!”

I run out the front door
and hop into Nanny’s car.

The seat hot against my thighs,

I squirm until it’s bearable.

Nanny gets in the car and starts it up.

“First swim of the season,
are you excited?”

“Uh-huh!”

I say, looking out the window at the pool.

I don’t hesitate to jump in
the cool water hitting me hard.

I surface and gasp,

“It’s really cold, Nanny!”

“I bet it is, sugar lump!”

I dive under and swim around
quickly adjusting to the temperature.

“Get in, Nanny, swim with me!”

“I’m gonna get some sun first.”

She walks over to her friends
already roasting and golden brown
in the afternoon summer sun.

I wave to Nanny
from the top of the water slide.

I slide down, water rushing up my nose

I surface coughing.

Finally she comes over to the side of the pool
sun-tanned friends in tow.

I bob in the water, on her legs, laughing.

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